Saint Lawrence's Church Mereworth

A miscellany of notes and researches

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The church from The Street (pre-World War Two)
(Note: The poles are telegraph poles. Mereworth had no electricity supply until the late 1940s)

Clues to the dedication of our church

Mereworth's unusual neo-Palladian church dates only from 1745. One of the quoins of the north-west corner of the church has scratched on it the graffito 1745[6]. The present building replaced the mediaeval church that had stood close to where the west pavilion of Mereworth Castle now stands. A fallen plaque on the south wall of the church records the title of the founder of the present church, in a memorial to his servant:

Near this place lies interred the Body of Mr Willm Overton 32 years Servant to John Earl of Westmorland the founder of this church and of Mereworth House who departed this life September the 9th 1767 aged 78 years

John Fane, 7th Earl of Westmorland, (24 March 1685 to 26 August 1762) had inherited Mereworth castle and the earldom from his elder brother Thomas, the 6th Earl. Having become rich as a "Turkey Merchant", he replaced the mediaeval house in the 1720s with a copy of Palladio's Villa Capra "La Rotunda" at Vicenza. The old church stood just outside the new house, spoiling its symmetry and giving him, a Jacobite sympathiser, no privacy. He resolved this by demolishing the old church and by building another a safe distance to the west.

Both churches were dedicated to Saint Lawrence. The dedication of the new church simply continued a link between the village and Saint Lawrence. This link was certainly there in the reign of Edward I (1272 to 1307) when the Lord of the Manor, Roger de Mereworth, obtained a grant of a fair to be held on 10th August, the feast day of Saint Lawrence. The de Mereworth family obviously held Saint Lawrence in great

regard, but did this result from the dedication of the church, or was the church dedicated to Saint Lawrence as a result of the saint's high esteem among the de Mereworth family?

A possible answer came from Ontario and Dr Mark Merryweather's genealogical research. This research suggested a link to a bloody episode in the Norman invasion of Ireland more than eight hundred years ago.

Dr Merryweather based much of his research on his grandfather's 1958 booklet about the family name. All variations of the name *Merryweather* derive from the mediaeval family name of de Mereworth. This family had formerly been known as the Saint Lawrence family, but it was the custom for a Lord of the Manor to take the name of his manor. There are records of the de Mereworth family dating from the time of Henry II (1154 to 1189).

Henry II was an ambitious king. In 1155, shortly after Henry's accession, pope Adrian IV dispatched him a bull, empowering him to conquer Ireland. Adrian was the only Englishman ever to be pope and his bull displayed a certain favouritism to the English king. Indirectly describing the Irish as "ignorant and barbarous", pope Adrian gave Henry leave to enter Ireland "for the advancement of the Christian religion". For Adrian's permission to invade Ireland, Henry had to pay a pension of one penny from every house to Saint Peter. In other words, Henry would donate money to the pope's favourite charity in return for the pope's support of an invasion of Ireland.

Henry did not start the invasion until 1169. Dermot MacMurrough had been king of Leinster, but had been ousted. Having lost all his allies in Ireland and wanting his kingdom

back, Dermot asked the English king Henry for help. Henry allowed Dermot to recruit in Wales, where Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke (who was also known as Strongbow) became a staunch ally. Richard did not take part in Dermot's first attempt to recover his kingdom, but arrived in force in August 1170 at Waterford. Richard fought a successful campaign and became a very powerful warlord. This power increased when Dermot died in May 1171 and Richard acceded to the kingdom of Leinster. Henry became a little worried by Richard's success and decided to take his own army across to Ireland in October 1171. Richard immediately offered Henry homage and all of his Irish conquests. Henry in return gave Richard the kingdom of Leinster.

During the next sixteen years, Richard's conquest attracted many other English adventurers to make their fortunes in Ireland. The lists of these adventurers include one Almeric de Sancto Laurentio and his son Nicholas. The Irish fiercely contested the English land grab, but this did not deter the adventurers. In August 1177 Almeric landed in Howth with his commanding officer Sir John de Courcy. At this time Almeric's name was recorded as Armoricus Tristram. The change of name came about in the following manner.

On 10th August 1177 Sir John's ships faced a large Danish and Irish army at Howth. Sir John was feeling poorly and asked Almeric to lead the army ashore. It was the feast day of Saint Lawrence, the patron saint of armourers, comedians, cooks and paupers. Facing impossible odds, Almeric prayed that if Saint Lawrence would give him the day, Almeric would change the family name from Tristram to Saint Lawrence (Sancto Laurentio).

Almeric led the landing party ashore and met the opposing forces on rising ground at Evora Bridge. The Battle of Evora was more of a bloody skirmish than a true battle, but Almeric defeated the combined force of Danes and Howth Irish at a place still known as the bloody stream. Almeric became first lord of Howth, founding a dynasty that survived until 1909.

The change of name to Saint Lawrence applied to the entire Tristram clan. Quite how the name became associated with Mereworth is unclear. Richard de Clare, however, had land in West Kent and had been born in Tonbridge. This suggests a link between Kent and the English adventure in Ireland. Dr Merryweather's research suggests that a branch of the Saint Lawrence clan became lords of the manor at Mereworth. Their castle and the village church stood where Mereworth castle now stands.

Did the second change of name (from Saint Lawrence to de Mereworth) make the family guilty enough to dedicate the church to the saint who had shown them such favour at the Battle of Evora? Or is the dedication just a coincidence? The family must have made this second change of name between 1177 and the death of Henry II in 1189. A plaque inside the church records the first Rector of Mereworth to have been Martin in 1185; was this also the year the church was dedicated to Saint Lawrence? The Domesday Book of 1086 records that Mereworth had a church, presumably Saxon, a hundred years before Martin. Burr's 1766 History suggests that the de Clares built the church. We know that the church was dedicated on 4th June but we have no record of the year.

What happened to the old church?

The only known depictions of old Mereworth church
Thumbnail sketches from 17th century maps

Planning Permission can be a difficult process these days. It wasn't always so. In January 1744 it was a much easier process if you had money and good connections. The following story, translated into our times, would be a proposal from, say, a property developer, to build a larger modern church on Kings Hill and to demolish St Lawrence church in order to build executive homes with a good view.

Mereworth once had a fine mediaeval church. Its core was a twelfth century Norman chapel which was subsequently extended in the succeeding centuries. This included the addition of a fourteenth or fifteenth century square tower as shown on the thumbnail sketches above. The old church sat alongside the old castle just above the little stream that runs down to Wateringbury, and close to an earlier Roman settlement. In the 1720s John Fane, 7th Earl of Westmorland, demolished the old castle and built in its place his magnificent new home – the "castle" that we see from the A26 today.

It may have been that the Earl, with his Jacobite leanings, wanted his privacy, or that the old church spoiled the view of his new home. Whatever the reason, by the 1740s the Earl had new plans. Documents from the time say, "The Earl is desirous to pull down the old parish church and build a new one in a more convenient place."

The Earl, with the Rector and "principal inhabitants" of Mereworth, petitioned the Bishop of Rochester and asked for permission to carry out his plan. The petition makes clear the generosity of the Earl in paying for a larger church with more room on a site with plenty of burial space. The old church was "an ancient building and decaying". The petition states, "The situation of it is most inconvenient being near the bounds of the parish on one side and that the greater number of parishioners dwell at a great distance from it."

The Bishop sent his Commissioner, who reported that the proposal "will be no detriment, inconvenience or disadvantage to the ministers, parishioners or inhabitants of the said parish or any other person having or pretending to have any right or interest in the said church or churchyard." So far so good! It was time to break the good news to the village.

On the fourteenth of January 1744, the Bishop of Rochester signed a citation to be read and published in the church. This was, from a note on the document, read out on 29th January 1744, more than a fortnight later. The citation said that the Bishop would give consent to the Earl's proposals unless he received "good and sufficient cause to the contrary".

The catch was that any objector had also "lawfully" to appear in person before the Bishop's "competent judge" at an appointed time and place. The citation gives this appointed time and place as between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. on 7th February 1744 in the vestry room of East Greenwich church. That gave a week for anyone to prepare a case, find accommodation and prepare for a 30-mile journey in the middle of winter. Inconveniently this was also during the last quarter of the moon, making night travel more difficult. With a journey time of between five and six hours, it almost certainly meant travelling up to Greenwich on Monday 6th and returning on Wednesday 8th.

The Earl appears to have had no opposition to his proposals in the official records, and the Bishop granted him permission to build the church that stands in The Street.

One interesting postscript to this story came from a former Mereworth churchwarden who had read through some old parish records before lodging them in County Archives. Back in the 80s she told me, "When they tried to bring all the bones up from the old graveyard, the villagers staged a sit-down protest in the road to stop the cart!" Perhaps the Earl's munificence was not so enthusiastically well-received by everyone, any more than it would be today.

There is no record of where the bones were put. They may be under the new church or in the north-east corner of the churchyard The only reference I have been able to find about the removal of bones is from an early 18th century book that has a section on Mereworth, a transcription of which follows:

"During the existence of the ancient castle of Mereworth, the church and parsonage-house stood in its immediate vicinity. These were such obstacles to the projects of improvement entertained by Lord Westmorland, that he procured a faculty for their removal; when a new church was erected by him, in a situation equally convenient to the parish; which also forms a pleasing object from the house. It was finished and consecrated in the year 1746. The parsonage was not rebuilt till some years after.

"A report is current, that when Lord Westmorland projected the removal of the church, he experienced a serious opposition from the prejudices of the inhabitants, whose relatives were interred there, against the desecration of the ancient cemetary. With a decision and magnificance of spirit, which in all his undertakings characterised him, he met the difficulty and removed the objection: it is said that he excavated the whole of the ancient church-yard, and deposited the contents in a pit, destined to constitute a part of the new one: thus assuring to the surviving relatives the future consolation of reposing in this rich compost of the remains of their ancestors."

There is a guidebook for the church in which are described the monuments and memorials that were saved from the old church and put in our mausoleum and vestry. Some memorials, however, didn't make it to the new church and are lost. Fortunately, one John Thorpe (1682-1750) had recorded all the memorials and their positions in the old church before it was demolished, and this record was published posthumously in 1769. Of the lost memorials, one was to Sam Cooke, one of our longest serving Rectors, another to Gasper Man, and finally a poignant memorial to "Little Leiston".

In the chancel:

On a grave stone are these two inscriptions following.

Here lyeth buried the body of Gasper Man, who departed this life the last of June, 1640.

And under the same stone is intom'd one whose ensegnes of amoury are figured in this cross, who is supposed to be of the Turkes, an ancient family in this parish of Mereworth.

And under this inscription is a cross flory of brass laid in the floor.

The ancient burial register records the burial of "Gaspar Manne" on 1st July 1640, the day after he died. The burial of Samuel Cook is recorded as the 29th August 1638, with a note that says, "*Who had been parson of this parish about foure and fourty years*".

On a stone South of that of Man are two brass plates, and on them the following inscriptions.

Here lyeth the body of Samuell Cooke, rector of this parish church of Mereworth for the space of 46 years and a half, and having accomplished the age of 78 years and upwardes deceased the 26th day of August, anno domini 1638, in expectation of the second comeing of his Lord and Saviour.

Here lyeth also the body of Susan Cooke, first wife to the said Samuell Cooke her husband, with whome she lived 26 years, and had by him nine children, whereof six survived her, and dyed the 14th day of July, anno domini 1611. being aged 52 years.

In the nave of the church. Was the grave of William Leyston, aged 12, the son of William Leyston (Gentleman), laid to rest on 13th April 1641:

On a grave stone near the pulpit are these arms, viz. On the upper part of a bend dancette, a cross pattee fitched, with the following inscription.

In a small grave here little Leiston lies,
Who bore a great resemblance to the skies;
For as the sun in twelve months space doth gett
To th'end of's course, twice six this saw and sett.

April 13, 1641.

Links to Slavery?

Part of the Church of England's recent report, "From Lament to Action – The Report of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce" covers the "contested heritage" of slavery recorded in church memorials and monuments.

The report addresses what it sees as the continuing negative impact of the slave trade, recommending decisive action to address the legacy of the Church's involvement in it. A church commission intends to catalogue "monuments and buildings related to the transatlantic slave trade or paid for from the profits of the slave trade." Acknowledging that it will not be easy to decide what to do about such monuments and buildings, the writers conclude, "While history should not be hidden, we also do not want to unconditionally [sic] celebrate or commemorate people who contributed to or benefitted from the tragedy that was the slave trade."

Did Saint Lawrence's Mereworth have any links to slavery? Where the money came from to build the church in the mid-1740s?

When slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, the Government paid out compensation - the equivalent today of £340 Billion. It was paid, not to those who had been enslaved, but to slave owners for the loss of their property. The UK Treasury finally paid off this debt in 2015. The names of those who benefitted from compensation are available online. The Fane and Dashwood families are mentioned as absentee slave owners, but not John Fane, who built Saint Lawrence's, or Sir Francis Dashwood, who later beautified the church.

Both Dashwood and Fane derived income from being "Turkey Merchants", meaning that their money mostly came from trade with the East, rather than from Caribbean slave estates.

There are, however, two references to slave owners from Mereworth. These are to Miles Stapleton (Rector from 1827 to 1830), and to Sir Francis Stapleton (Rector from 1832 to 1874). According to a memorial in the church vestry, Miles founded our first Sunday School. Miles would have benefitted from the income generated on a Caribbean estate through Elizabeth, his wife, who owned slaves in Antigua. Francis unsuccessfully claimed compensation as an executor for the loss of 32 enslaved people at the Montpellier plantation on Nevis.

There is, therefore, no direct evidence of slavery connections in Mereworth church or its memorials. This does not entirely explain where the money came from for building Mereworth Church. Quite what we should do about it, should links to slavery be found, would be open to debate between the parish and the Church of England commission.

From a watercolour of 1807 (Kent Archaeology Society). In 1814 Thomas Dearn wrote that the church, "…obtruded on the public way and without a solitary tree, to veil its peerless beauty…"

The Churchyard

The Earl of Westmorland gifted land for a new church in 1745. Its churchyard ran out of space in the early 1900s and was extended twice. In November 1932 the final churchyard extension was cleared of trees, and the churchwarden was left to "tidy the extension". The wall around it was built in 1933.

Over time many trees have grown up in the churchyard. Some were deliberately planted, such as our variegated holly trees. These were planted before the 1880s. Other trees such as birch, sycamore, cherry and damson have self-sown. Our yew trees, a traditional feature of English churchyards, could live for many centuries to come. The oak that stands by the war memorial was planted to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and, we believe, has a time capsule buried under it.

The churchyard is in a Conservation Area and has designated *Local Wildlife Site* status. We have over 100 species of lichen on our tombstones and trees. The grassland is home to many native species of plants, fungi, insects, toads and lizards. Bats and raptors have been seen around the church. We encourage flowering plants in the churchyard to boost insects and biodiversity. The wild areas, wild flower areas and, of course, mown areas, are all maintained by a small group of volunteers.

Notable Graves (*Other than those in the guidebook*):

Walter Jobson Horne (died 7th March 1953 aged 87):

Walter, the inventor of the Jobson Horne ear probe, was a distinguished London surgeon who lived in Willow Wents, Mereworth. His grave is just to the west of the church. His simple invention is still in use nearly 70 years after his death.

Sarah Gorman:

There is a lone gravestone in the North East corner of the graveyard. It is that of Sarah Gorman, the tragic victim of domestic violence, and her inscription reads as follows:

Sarah GORMAN, hoppicker who was killed near Brewers Hall in this parish, 21 Sept, 1873, aged 45 yrs. This stone was erected by subscriptions of hoppickers of the parish and neighborhood.

Issue 502 of The Illustrated Police News (Saturday, September 27, 1873 described the circumstances of her death under the headline "MURDER IN KENT". The Briar's Hall mentioned in the article is actually Brewer's Hall:

On Saturday night, between eleven and twelve o'clock, two hop-pickers named James and Sarah GORMAN, husband and wife, recently employed in the hop-grounds of Mr. HYLES, of Maidstone, left Mereworth, and went along the road towards East Peckham, in the direction of the hopper-house in which they had been living. They were heard quarrelling between one and two o'clock on Sunday morning, and at five the woman was found lying insensible in the road, with her husband standing near to her. Her ribs were broken in, some of them having penetrated almost to the heart, and her body bore other marks of violence. She was taken to one of the hopper-houses and remained unconscious unto two o'clock in the afternoon when she died. The police were communicated with, and the husband was apprehended. A man named FOORD was the person who found the woman lying by the side of the road, and he states that the husband said to him, "Look here, George, what a man has done." pointing to his wife.

The husband, after his arrest, moaned continuously, repeating the words "Oh, my poor wife," over and over again. The man is a pensioner from the Royal Marines, and the deceased is his second wife. He is about 45 years of age, and slightly built. He was brought before the Hon. and Rev. E. V. BLIGH (in the chair), the Hon. and Rev. Sir Francis STAPLETON, Bart., and the Hon. B. P. NEVILL on Monday afternoon, and charged with the wilful murder of his wife at Mereworth on the 21st September.

In answer to the charge the prisoner said he never raised his hand against her. He was cautioned against making any further statements at present, and the following evidence was then taken: - Police-constable Richard MILLER, stationed at Mereworth, said that on the morning of Sunday, the 21st September, at about half-past one, he heard a noise along the road leading from Mereworth to Tonbridge. This was near the post office. He went to the place and saw the prisoner and a woman. The woman was sitting by the side of the road and the man was standing near her. They were quarrelling, and witness told the man he had better go home, and take the woman with him. They then left off disputing, and witness, who had heard of a case of robbery elsewhere, left the place. Witness afterwards saw a woman lying dead, whom he recognised as the one he had seen in the road. The body was covered with bruises.

Police-sergeant BATES said he was sent for to go to one of the hopper houses at Briars' Hall Farm, Mereworth, on Sunday morning, at about half-past seven. He reached there a few minutes after eight, and found a woman lying nearly dead. From what he had been told he arrested the prisoner, whom he

found sitting upon a heap of bricks near to the oast-house. His clothes were much stained with blood, and there was also blood upon one of his boots. On the way to the police-station he said he was innocent of the charge, and had not laid a hand upon her. Superintendent EALSE said that if the magistrates would consent to remand the prisoner, there would be ample evidence forthcoming to warrant them in committing him for trial, and a remand was accordingly granted.

Flora Tebay:

The headstone on the grave of Flora Tebay in our churchyard records "died May 24 1902 aged 24 years. Killed in a lift in Westminster." Without naming Flora, the newspapers reported the "Carlton House Terrace Lift Death" in May 1902. The Carlton House Hotel stood near Pall Mall and Trafalgar Square: *The inquest began on the death of the housemaid who was fatally injured by the luggage lift at 18, Carlton House Terrace. She had placed the breakfast articles in the lift, then started it to go up another floor, when her chin got wedged and drew her into the lift-shaft and she was hung by the neck. The poor woman literally had the life throttled out of her.*

John Waterson:

In addition to our two Commonwealth War Graves, we have the military grave of Private John Harold Waterson of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. John died on 6th November 1954 aged 18. He was born on 16th February 1936 in Solihull, Birmingham and was the victim of a military "hit and run" accident, possibly in the Mereworth Woods training ground. He was not killed in combat and was probably a National Serviceman. As he died in Mereworth he had the right of being buried in our churchyard. That's all we know about this unfortunate young man.

Mr John Greensted

All but one of the burials in our churchyard are aligned east-west. The only grave that is aligned north-south is just inside the church gate. It is that of John Greensted (4th September 1746 to 30th October 1814). The reason for this anomaly may be found in the baptism registers. Despite the suspension of marriages and burials, baptisms continued throughout 1745 and 1746 while the old church at the Castle was being demolished and the new church was being built in The Street. The new church was consecrated on 26th August 1746. The registers record the baptism of John, the son of John and Mary Grinsted on 23rd September 1746 "*the first to be baptised in this Church*". Despite the difference in spelling, this was the same person, whose special burial plot reflected being the first person baptised in the splendid new church of Saint Lawrence.

Peter Beatty:

Peter Randolph Louis Beatty (2 April 1910 – 26 October 1949) was an English aristocrat and wealthy racehorse breeder. Peter was the youngest son of Earl Beatty, First Sea Lord at the end of World War One. Peter's main residence was Mereworth Castle in 1949 and he was one of Britain's most eligible bachelors. Peter had suffered from poor eyesight since birth, and despite eye surgery in September 1949 was told that his could not be saved. On 26 October 1949, while staying at the Ritz Hotel in London, and wearing only pyjamas and a robe, he told his valet he was going to the sixth floor to visit friends. He then fell six floors from a window to his death at the rear of the hotel. The coroner recorded a verdict of suicide. Peter is buried south of the Mereworth church portico.

Dominick Browne:

Dominick Geoffrey Edward Browne, (21 October 1901 – 7 August 2002) was 4th Baron Oranmore and Browne and 2nd Baron Mereworth. He took these titles in 1927 when his parents were killed in a car accident. He served in the House of Lords for 72 years, a record at the time, but never once made a speech. He lived in Mereworth Castle until he sold it 1930. He went to live in his Irish residence, Castle MacGarrett, where he became a champion of Irish culture. In England, he is probably more famous for the sad death of one of his sons, the Hon. Tara Browne (4 March 1945 – 18 December 1966). Tara, who was heir to the Guinness fortune, was killed in a car accident in central London. Tara had been a friend of the Beatles, and his death is described in the song, "A Day in the Life" on the "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" album. John Lennon had been composing music at the piano when he read the coroner's verdict about his friend's death in a newspaper. Dominick is buried just north of the church.

The Wateringbury Hall Tragedy, October 1927:

The funeral cortege of Captain and Mrs. Bazley-White and their little son at 12.45 on Friday 21st October 1927

A memorial above our font records the death of four people in a house fire at Wateringbury Hall. This had been a property that stood at the junction of Pizien Well Road and the A26 Tonbridge Road. Nothing is left of the building, but some of the boundary walls remain. The story of the fatal fire on the night of Monday 17th to Tuesday 18th October 1927 can be pieced together from the inquest of 20th October 1927.

There had been press speculation about the cause of the fire, but the inquest concluded that the cause was unknown and the coroner returned an open verdict. Opening the inquest, however, the coroner had said: "While I do not suggest it was anything but accidental, there are, of course, possible alternatives." An attempt to re-open the inquest in January 1928 failed, and no further investigations were ever made.

The victims, all of whom were found to have suffocated, were Captain Richard Leslie Booth Bazley-White D.S.O., aged 41, Mrs. Catherine Beckford Bazley-White, aged 35, Master John Richard Leslie Bazley-White, aged 4, and Miss Rosa (or Rosina) Weekes, aged 55, and nurse to Master John. Captain Bazley-White had had a distinguished war record, serving from November 1914 in the Royal West Kent Regiment and Egyptian Army. The bodies, which were found together with Captain's dog, had been charred beyond recognition.

There had been much confusion among the rescuers at the time of the fire, and the inquest jury stated, "We feel that those first on the scene might have taken more steps to ascertain that all the occupants had been got out the house before they informed others that they had."

Mereworth and Cambrai

On the south side of the altar in St Lawrence church there is a small brass plaque that reads, *"Flag saved by Driver Victor J Allman 94th Field Coy RE from the burning ruins of Cambrai Town Hall Oct. 10th 1918 and by him presented to Mereworth Parish Church*." The flag was proudly on display until at least 1989, flanked by the Union flag on the north side of the altar. Some of Victor's descendants continued to live in Mereworth, and I am indebted to the late Mrs Ena Wickens for helping me piece together the story of her father's First World War service.

Victor Allman enlisted in the Royal Engineers in 1915. The 94th Field Company of the Royal Engineers was assigned to the 19th (Western) Infantry Division of the Third Army, supporting the fighting men as well as taking part in the fighting when required. The Royal Engineers performed a vital role in the war, maintaining roads, bridges railways, communications links and artillery. They also built the fortifications that gave the infantry cover from enemy gunfire.

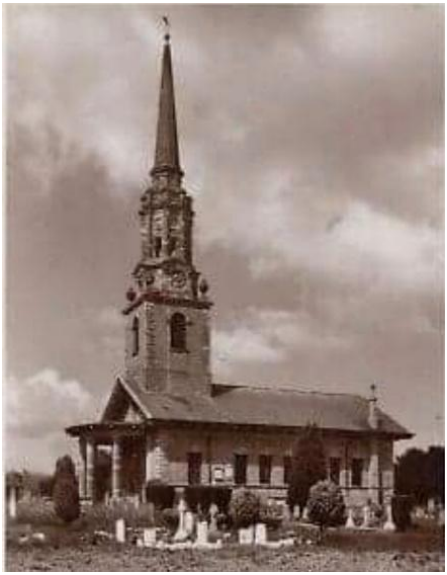
The 217 men of the 94th went to France in July 1915, and saw action at Messines and Passchendaele. The company would have had 37 drivers in charge of the 17 riding horses, 55 draught horses and 4 pack horses. Each driver carried a rifle. On 8th and 9th October 1918, the 94th Field Company took part in the liberation of Cambrai. The town had fallen to the Germans in 1914, before the combat had stagnated into trench warfare.

In September 1917, a surprise British attack with a new weapon, the tank, had briefly captured Cambrai. Failure to consolidate the advance meant that that the town fell back into German hands, and trench warfare continued throughout the winter. A German offensive in March 1918 pushed back the British lines and the war began to open up. By June the Germans had managed to advance to within 56 miles of Paris. A final German push in July 1918 failed, and the allied forces of Britain, France and America gained ground. The British forced back the German line by attacking the weaker fronts, using tanks in coordination with infantry divisions and aircraft. The attack on Cambrai in 1918 was therefore short, effective and resulted in very few casualties. A Canadian Division took the town, but pushed north. Cambrai was left in ruins with much of it still burning during the mopping-up and consolidation operation on 10 October 1918. There is a film of this taken at the time, showing the burnt-out town hall (search YouTube for "Cambrai, October 1918").

Victor Allman folded up the rescued flag and took it out of Cambrai on a gun carriage, riding his horse "Tom" (whom he had spared the "cruel" military spikes of his spurs by having replaced each with a silver threepenny bit). The flag came back to Mereworth after Victor had been demobilised, and it was Miss Moore, a daughter of the Rector and friend of the Allman family, who arranged for the flag to be placed in the church. After the war, Victor and his wife lived in North Star Cottages, where Ena was born. He worked as a plasterer, and during World War Two, was a special policeman in West Malling. He

also looked after a small nut platt that still stands in Beech Road.

The Great War, however, caught up with Victor many years later. During his war service in the trenches, Victor had suffered frostbite in his foot. He died at the age of 79 after this foot had become gangrenous. The flag he saved went missing, perhaps stolen, in the 1990s. However, like all the brave people who served in the Great War, his name is engraved on the War Memorial outside the church, "Lest we forget".



Victor with the Cambrai flag, just before it was put in church, and the church as it looked during the First World War.

Saint Lawrence's in literature

The writer and politician Horace Walpole visited Mereworth church in 1752. He describes the internal paintings as follows:

'*The inside is the most abominable piece of tawdriness that ever was seen, stuffed with pillars painted in imitation of verd antique, as all the sides are like Sienna marble; but the greatest absurdity is a Doric frieze, between the triglyphs of which is the Jehovah, the I.H.S. and the Dove'*

The best-known description of life in Mereworth is probably C Henry Warren's "A Boy in Kent", which is based on the writer's childhood in the village during the first decade of the Twentieth Century. This is a description of the church:

"Presently Dickie would arrive: turning the huge key in the lock, he would open the door and strike a match, filling the pillared emptiness with long, dancing shadows. Far away at the eastern end of the church, the golden cross on the altar caught a speck of light and gleamed mysteriously through the darkness. Our footsteps echoed under the high roof. We kicked against chairs and pews and the noise volleyed through the vast building. Carrying a lighted taper in his hand, Dickie advanced up the aisle, a shadow ten times his height wavering away from him… Giving one of us the taper to hold, Dickie clambered on to a chair, from which insecure perch he proceeded to light the only two lamps that were allowed for practice nights. Then, when he had stoked up the furnaces for the night, rattling his shovels and rakes down there in the bowels of the church, he would go home and leave us to wait for Mr Hughes [the Rector]."

The artist and novelist Denton Welch visited Mereworth many times in the 1940s, and described the war work of his friend (later partner), Eric Oliver, in a journal entry of January 1944:

"For lunch they make a little fire and all squat round, and when Eric wants to be alone he walks away and lies down in the grass, or in the pew of an old church. He and another chap lay down in the pews of Mereworth Church and drank from their tea-bottles quietly, and rested."

In 1931, Archaeologia Cantiana, the journal of the Kent Archaeological Society, published an account of a journey through Kent of four gentleman from Cambridge in July 1735. It describes the old church outside Mereworth castle:

"After a hearty Breakfast at the Publick House, we proceeded to the Nobleman's to feed our Eyes; & here indeed they were well content to be kept open, where they met with a perfect Novelty; an Italian House in England; a British Gentleman's Dwelling, fitted to keep off Heat from the People under the Line. Notwithstanding the Variance of the House with the Climate, it is a sweet Place, situated in the Middle of a Mote: in the North Front a large Bason; in the South a large Canal, the View terminated by a Theater of Hills & Wood; on the West Front a View into the Country; on the East, a very large Bowling Green North of that a large Kitchin Garden; South, a fine Wood, cut into Walks, & a Cherry Orchard, & descending Terras all within the Gardens. In the North Front of the House are very good Stables, & opposite to them the Church, in which is the burying Place of the Earls of Westmorland; a large Monument of the Baroness Despencer & Burwash, Daur to the Lord Abergavenny, & Wife of Sir Tho: Fane of Badsell in Kent; a Monument also of Sir Tho: Nevell, Councellor to K. Henry 8. who died 1514."

William Ireland wrote in 1829, "*The church contains no pews, having seats after the manner of those on the continent.*"

References and Acknowledgements:

Articles in this booklet have been compiled from various pieces that I have written over the last twenty years, some of which appeared in the Mereworth & West Peckham Record and Mereworth Village Fete programme. Much of the research was based on documents in Kent County Archives and from online sources including Wikipedia. Some information derives from Mr Andrew Wells's excellent guidebook to Saint Lawrence's, which is on sale in the church. While this is not a complete list, I wish to acknowledge the following sources of information:

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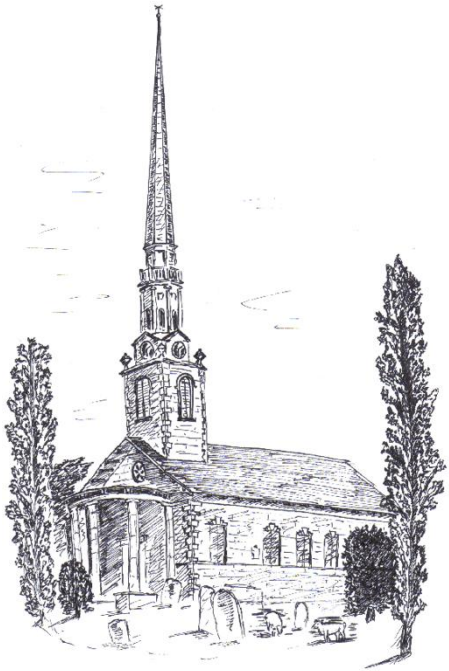

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